

An Interview with the Paintings Conservation Interns

<http://famsfconservation.wordpress.com/>

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Dates of internship: September 25, 2010 to March 25, 2011

Education:

Ecole de Condé – Paris

Degree: Bachelor's degree in painting conservation **Date of completion:** 2004

Degree: Master's degree with distinction in painting conservation **Date of completion:** 2006

University Paris 1 – La Sorbonne

Degree: Bachelor's degree of Conservation – Restoration **Date of completion:** 2009

Degree: Master's degree of Conservation-Restoration **Date of completion:** Expected 2011

Q: How did you decide on conservation as a career and what steps did you take before applying to conservation programs?

A: *I discovered conservation, a discipline not well known by the public in France, in the mid-'90s through a documentary directed by Nicolas Philibert entitled "La ville Louvre" (Louvre City). I was about 14 years old and I remember being fascinated by this new presentation of the Louvre museum. The director let us discover the behind the scenes, what was involved in heritage conservation through a journey into the reserves, workshops and exhibition rooms.*

I also remember watching another fascinating documentary titled "The restoration of the Night Watch" directed by Theo Kok, which showed the restoration of Rembrandt at the Rijksmuseum after an act of vandalism. Those are the two references that I have kept in mind while starting studies in history and art history.

In spring 2001 the translation of the "Theory of restoration" of Cesare Brandi was published in France. For me it was a landmark discovery of the complex thought of Brandi but also a discovery of the multitude of disciplines convened in the practice of restoration. I started my training a few months later.

In France, the system of pre-program does not exist but you're invited to do internships regularly, since the first year of education, during your free time. So I assisted several private conservators in France. I also had the chance to participate for six months in the restoration of the "Galerie des Glaces" in the Versailles castle and for six other months in the restoration of wall paintings of a French church in Rome.

Q: What attracted you to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco?

A: *I had the chance to participate in many restorations of ancient art in Europe and I wanted to take advantage of my last year of school to confront modern and contemporary American painting that I like in FAMSF's twentieth century high quality collection of artworks. But it also allowed me to discover more old American masters that I hardly knew. For me the de Young collection embodied a global American art history.*

The other decisive element was the reputation of conservators working in the department of painting conservation and the fact that they are from different generations, have different backgrounds and, in consequence, different approaches in conservation.

Finally, I can't hide that I was really attracted to the city and, as an enthusiast of architecture, I loved the idea of working in this new and magnificent building.

Q: What challenges did you face in coming to San Francisco for your internship?

A: *As for every expatriation, this internship at 9000km from Paris is accompanied by obvious material and personal sacrifices but they are quickly forgotten considering the quality of the experiences I have here.*

Anyway, in case of homesickness, I just have to go down two floors to find myself face to face with Gauguin, Vuillard or Seurat thanks to the exhibition " Post-Impressionist masterpieces from the Musée d'Orsay."

However, if I have to mention a challenge, it is the language barrier in a working context. It is very frustrating not to be totally the conservator here that I am in my own country. There is in the conservation an important empirical knowledge that I sometimes have difficulties to share due to lack of specific technical vocabulary.

Fortunately, I am surrounded by considerate conservators whose patience allows me to gradually improve the situation.

Q: Compare and contrast your experience at FAMSF to your previous museum experience.

A: *My only experience in a museum before this one was an internship in preventive conservation in the Modern Art Department of the Fine Arts Museum in Nantes (France). I cannot compare these experiences because I was attached to a curatorial department and because I did not conduct a restoration.*

However, I am pleased for several reasons from this experience across the Atlantic. It gives me the opportunity to observe the similarities and differences between the restoration in France and in the United States. From something as trivial as the products used here up to essential things such as major references in American literature that I did not know- Brealey, Hedley or Keck for example.

I also discovered how the collaboration between conservators is organized in a major national network.

Q: What projects are you focusing on during your internship?

A: *The painting conservation department has satisfied my desire to work on modern and contemporary works by giving me the responsibility of artworks painted by Bruce Conner, Diego Rivera or from the Rudolph Schaeffer School of Design for example. I am therefore confronted with technical problems as well as ethical and deontological issues specific to the conservation of this type of work.*

Working on Bruce Conner's assemblage painting also allows me to enrich my academic research into the implication of the artist in the preservation of his work mainly through interviews and through the collection of material samples during the creation of an artwork. In the case of this restoration, I have read some interviews of Bruce Conner and it helped me to propose a protocol of interventions that totally respects the opinion of the artist and his opinion about the aging of his artworks.

Q: What is one interesting or surprising thing you have discovered about doing conservation in a museum setting?

A: *It's the first time that I have perceived the variety of responsibilities that are the daily routine for museum conservators. It's exciting to be able to simultaneously conduct technical interventions of restoration, research, documentation, take care of the artworks exhibited in the permanent collection, deal with temporary exhibitions or loans, courier lent artworks, etc..*

In my daily activities in this museum, I like the opportunity to get opinions, advice, and answers about my projects, not only from the painting conservators who are invested in the success of my work but also from curators and conservators from other departments. This collaboration is interesting and allows me to have a different perspective on the works that I restore and to think of other solutions for the treatment of artworks. Working on modern paintings, I am facing materials that are sometimes difficult to treat and I have been able to find new resources using methods of conservation of other departments.

To give you some concrete examples, I have used methods of textile conservation in the case of areas of unpainted canvas, the methods of paper conservation in the case of cleaning a very sensitive gouache layer, and I followed the advice of the object conservation department when I treated a very matte painting.

Q: What do you find rewarding about working in conservation?

A: *Conservation requires humility because a good intervention is the one that nobody will ever talk about, the one that managed to stay in the background for entirely sustaining the artwork. There is no public reward of the work done. But what is won is far more precious, an intimate and personal satisfaction to daily work to preserve our own cultural heritage, to forge a special bond with artworks and maybe more when your intervention improved the understanding and knowledge about a piece or an artist.*

Q: What do you plan to do after your internship?

A: *At the end of my time at the De Young, I will return to France. I will have a few months to finish my academic research that validate my diploma. In parallel I will conduct interviews with artists in a contemporary art foundation in Paris.*

Q: In the future, do you hope to continue working at a museum, or do you plan to have an independent practice?

A: *I really hope that I will find a position in a museum at a moment of my career, but it is not very realistic because I know that there are very few opportunities in France or in Europe. French museums almost always ask independent conservator to restore their collections. So I think that I'll have, like almost every French conservator, a private practice.*